

FROM THE ARAB SPRING to the plaza occupation movement in Spain, the student movement in the UK and Occupy in the US, many new social movements have started peacefully, only to adopt a diversity of tactics as they grew in strength and collective experiences. The last ten years have revealed more clearly than ever the role of nonviolence. Propped up by the media, funded by the government, and managed by NGOs, nonviolent campaigns around the world have helped oppressive regimes change their masks, and have helped police to limit the growth of rebellious social movements. Increasingly losing the debates within the movements themselves, proponents of nonviolence have increasingly turned to the mainstream media and to government and institutional funding to drown out critical voices.

The Failure of Nonviolence examines most of the major social upheavals since the end of the Cold War to establish what nonviolence can accomplish, and what a diverse, unruly, non-pacified movement can accomplish. Focusing especially on the Arab Spring, Occupy, and the recent social upheavals in Europe, this book discusses how movements for social change can win ground and open the spaces necessary to plant the seeds of a new world.

Peter Gelderloos is the author of *How Nonviolence Protects the State, Consensus, & Anarchy Works*.

The Failure of Nonviolence is available through Left Bank Books, AK Press, and Little Black Cart. To order a copy direct from Left Bank Books go to leftbankbooks.bigcartel.com.

The Failure of Nonviolence



*From the Arab Spring
to Occupy*

A Preview of the New Book by

PETER GELDERLOOS

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WHEN THEY POURED ACROSS THE BORDER
 I WAS CAUTIONED TO SURRENDER,
 THIS I COULD NOT DO;
 I TOOK MY GUN AND VANISHED.
 [...]
 “OH, THE WIND, THE WIND IS BLOWING,
 THROUGH THE GRAVES THE WIND IS BLOWING,
 FREEDOM SOON WILL COME;
 THEN WE’LL COME FROM THE SHADOWS.

-Leonard Cohen, “*The Partisan*”

do not collaborate with the police and the other structures of power, and as long as they accept that other people in the struggle are going to use other methods, according to their situation and their preferences. It would also help if they acknowledged the historical failings of nonviolence, but that is only their concern if they wish to develop effective nonviolent methods that must actually be taken seriously, as contrasted with the hollow, comfortable forms of nonviolence that have predominated in the last decades.

And while any struggle not attempting to enforce homogeneity must accept the existence of a diversity of tactics, I do not wish to give anyone the impression that we, collectively, have been doing a good job of building this struggle, or that the diversity of tactics framework is adequate to our needs. We need much stronger social struggles if we are to overcome the State, capitalism, patriarchy—all the forces that oppress and exploit us—to create a world on the basis of mutual aid, solidarity, free association, and a healthy relationship with the earth and one another. To that end, I will conclude by talking about struggles that have revealed promising new directions, and about how we can move past a diversity of tactics so that different methods of struggle can complement one another critically and respectfully.

few principled supporters of nonviolence (writing in *Fifth Estate* or on *Richmond Indymedia*, for example) who criticized the tone of the book but accepted many of the criticisms, and called on other pacifists to read it in order to come to terms with certain mistakes.

In this book also, I argue in favor of a diversity of tactics. At its most basic, the concept of a diversity of tactics is nothing more than the recognition that different methods of struggle exist side by side. My goal is not to make other people think like I do or support the exact same tactics and methods that I do. To me, not only is it inconceivable that a movement contain a homogeneity of methods, it is also undesirable. It is nothing but authoritarianism to censor a movement for social change so that everyone else uses the same method as we do. This is why I believe that nonviolence—meaning an attempt to force nonviolent methods across an entire movement⁷—is authoritarian and belongs to the State. For the same reason, I do not want to impose my methods on others. And even if this could be done through the pure force of reason, simply convincing everybody (and it couldn't, for no human group ever thinks with the same mind, and thank the heavens for that), it would be a grave mistake. We can never know whether our analysis and our methods are wrong, except sometimes with hindsight. Our movements are stronger when they employ diverse methods and analyses and these different positions criticize one another.

Those of us who have tried to create a more conflictive struggle have often been wrong, and sometimes we have been aided by the criticism of those who are more drawn to healing and reconciliation than to conflict. But that kind of mutual criticism and support is only possible if those who today separate themselves as pacifists decide unequivocally to stand always with those who struggle, and always against the powers that oppress.

My aim with this book is not to convert or delegitimize every person who prefers nonviolence. Within a struggle that uses a diversity of tactics, there is room for those who prefer peaceful methods as long as they do not try to write the rules for the entire movement, as long as they

⁷This is by no means a straw man: nonviolence is predominantly expressed not as the idea that sometimes we should use peaceful tactics but the idea that a movement must be nonviolent in its entirety. "A 99% commitment to nonviolence is not enough," as some have said. The concept in its essence presupposes a division of all actions on the basis of the category of "violence", a belief that the nonviolent actions are superior and that violent actions, even in small quantity, will corrupt or pollute the movement as a whole. To be a proponent of nonviolence is not to simply prefer peace, but to sign up to the peace police and attempt to determine the course of the whole movement.

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Introduction: Nonviolence has lost the debate

NONVIOLENCE HAS LOST THE DEBATE. Over the last 20 years, more and more social movements and rebellions against oppression and exploitation have broken out across the world, and within these movements people have learned all over again that nonviolence does not work. They are learning that the histories of purported nonviolent victories have been falsified, that specific actions or methods that could be described as nonviolent work best when they are complemented by other actions or methods that are illegal and combative. They are learning that exclusive, dogmatic nonviolence does not stand a chance at achieving a revolutionary change in society, at getting to the roots of oppression and exploitation and bringing down those who are in power.

At best, nonviolence can oblige power to change its masks, to put a new political party on the throne and possibly expand the social sectors that are represented in the elite, without changing the fundamental fact that there is an elite that rules and benefits from the exploitation of everybody else. And if we look at all the major rebellions of the last two decades, since the end of the Cold War, it seems that nonviolence can only effect this cosmetic change if it has the support of a broad part of the elite—usually the media, the wealthy, and at least a part of the military, because nonviolent resistance has never been able to resist the full force of the State. When dissidents do not have this elite support, strict nonviolence seems like the surest way to kill a movement, as when pure nonviolence led to the total

collapse of the anti-war movement in 2003¹, or an enforced nonviolence led to the collapse of the student movement in Spain in 2009².

In dozens of new social movements around the world, people have gone into the streets for the first time thinking that nonviolence is the way, because contrary to the claims of many pacifists, our society teaches us that while violence may be acceptable for governments, people on the bottom who wish to change things must always be nonviolent. This is why from the Occupy Movement in the US to the plaza occupation movement in Spain to the student movement in the UK, tens of thousands of people who were participating in a struggle for the first time in their lives, who only knew about revolution and resistance from television or from public schools (which is to say, from the media or from the government) overwhelmingly believed in nonviolence. And around the world, experience taught many of these people that they were wrong, that the pacifists, together with the media and the government had lied to them, and in order to change anything, they had to fight back.

This has been a collective learning process that has taken place around the globe, and the direction of that process has overwhelmingly gone from nonviolence to a diversity of tactics—the idea that we cannot impose a limitation of tactics or one method of struggle on an entire movement, that we need to be able to choose from a wide range of tactics, that struggles are more robust when such a variety of tactics are present, and that everybody needs to decide for themselves how to struggle (peaceful tactics, therefore, are included within a diversity of tactics, where nonviolence

¹This argument is documented in *How Nonviolence Protects the State*. In sum, nonviolent organizations predicted, after the largest protests the world had ever seen, that their peaceful methods would prevent the war. When they were proven wrong, many people who believed in this nonviolent model for change became disillusioned and dropped out, whereas other people became frustrated with the enforcement of nonviolence and the parade-like, self-congratulatory character of the movement, as well as its refusal to express rage at mass murder or condone the sabotage of the war effort. The movement imploded and disappeared with spectacular speed.

²In Spain, self-appointed student leaders prevented a discussion of a diversity of tactics and physically ejected students who tried to mask up or practice self-defense in the protests. They organized a series of huge protests and university occupations in response to the privatization of higher education, and after the largest of these protests, strictly nonviolent, the movement swiftly disappeared (until reemerging with a strike and riots three years later). After the university occupations were evicted in Barcelona, a part of the students used direct action and combative tactics to occupy an empty building in the city center and set up a “Free University”. The space for self-organization and alternative education was won only because some students decided to practice combative street tactics. Thanks to this illegal experience, the student movement was kept alive, and the self-appointed leaders were no longer in control of it when it reemerged in 2012.

social movements gain more ground. Mainstream, for-profit media give nonviolent activists interviews while they demonize the so-called violent ones. University professors and NGO employees living off of grants from the government or wealthy donors (and living lush, compared to those of us who make our living working in restaurants and bars, shoplifting, teaching in public schools, driving taxis, doing temp work or sex work, or volunteering for medical experiments), also tend to weigh in on the side of nonviolence, bringing a hefty array of institutional resources along with them.

All of these resources overwhelm the small counterinformation websites, the pirate radio stations, and the all-volunteer independent presses of the movement. For every book we print out, often cutting and binding by hand, they can print a thousand books. The proponents of nonviolence, yet again, have chosen to unscrupulously work with and for the system in a Faustian pact, availing themselves of resources, economic security, safety from repression, and even fame, but make no mistake: they have revealed themselves as morally corrupt. The closer one gets to the do-it-yourself, the self-organized, and the crowd-funded structures of our movements for revolution, and the more one is immersed in the streets, in the struggles of those who are fighting for their own lives, the more likely you are to find support for a diversity of tactics. And the closer you get to the NGOs, to the corporate publishing houses, to the mainstream media or the richly funded “alternatives”, to the elite universities, to the media-conscious careerists, and to the halls of wealth and privilege, the more likely you are to find strict support for exclusive nonviolence.

Nonviolence has failed on a global level. It has proven to be a great friend to governments, political parties, police departments, and NGOs, and a traitor to our struggles for freedom, dignity, and well-being. The vast majority of its proponents have jumped ship to cozy up to the media, the State, or wealthy benefactors, using any cheap trick, manipulation, or form of violence (like attacking fellow protesters or helping the cops carry out arrests) that comes in handy to win the contest, even if it means the division and death of the movement. Many have proven themselves to be opportunists, politicians, or careerists. And a principled minority who actually have remained true to their historical movements still have not answered for past failings or current weaknesses.

In response to *How Nonviolence Protects the State*, there were a

This is certainly confirmed by what I have seen with my own eyes. The episode has played out so many times that it has lost all its humorous irony: proponents of nonviolence attacking those they disagree with for not using peaceful tactics.

There was a time when the only people dishonest enough to toss around the accusation that the Black Bloc or other masked protesters are police infiltrators were Stalinists. Now, this has become a stock argument, not only by conspiracy nuts but also by pacifists who claim the mantle of Gandhi and King. Lies and manipulations are a resort of those who have lost an argument but don't have the decency to admit it.

In the plaza occupation movement in Spain, self-appointed leaders imposed strict adherence to nonviolence, even prohibiting the blocking of streets or the painting of banks, and they boycotted any debate on the subject. In Barcelona, they even made the paperwork disappear when anarchists tried to reserve the sound system to organize such a debate. And during Occupy, a number of mainstream journalists posing as friends of the movement published denunciations filled with manipulations and misinformation in a bald-faced attempt to criminalize a part of the movement.

When one of these journalists, *The New York Times*' Chris Hedges, sat down to debate a member of Crimethinc,⁵ he repeatedly contradicted himself, denied some of the arguments he made in his infamous article, and proved incapable of understanding that violence is a social construct that is applied to some forms of harm but not to others, often depending on whether such harm is considered normal within our society. When some nonviolence proponents broke the principles of unity and denounced fellow protesters after the demonstrations against the Vancouver Olympics, one of them subsequently debated Harsha Walia from "No One is Illegal", and got soundly thrashed.⁶

Most proponents of nonviolence have been smarter, and they have avoided any level playing field. They have not chosen the terrain of the movement itself, because collective experiences repeatedly prove them wrong. Instead they have turned towards the elite and gotten support from the system itself. Mainstream, for-profit publishing companies print out their books by the millions, in a stream of titles that increases as combative

excludes all other tactics and methods).

Eight years ago, there were frequent debates between proponents of nonviolence and proponents of a diversity of tactics. In the fall of 2004, I wrote *How Nonviolence Protects the State*, one of several similar polemics to appear at the time (the arguments I make in that book, as well as criticisms of it, are outlined in the appendix). In the climate of the antiglobalization movement, which was heavily skewed towards nonviolence thanks to the disappearance or institutionalization of the social movements that came before us, and thanks to the heavy NGO participation, the debate felt like an uphill battle, although most of us were aided and inspired by the discovery or republication of texts from earlier generations of struggle, like Ward Churchill's *Pacifism as Pathology* or Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*.

At that time, proponents of nonviolence frequently emerged from their ivory towers to debate with proponents of a diversity of tactics. But in the intervening years, something has changed. Insurrections have occurred around the world, while nonviolent movements have proven themselves stillborn or morally bankrupt (see Chapter 3). Even within the confines of the antiglobalization movement, the most powerful and communicative protests were those that openly organized on the basis of a diversity of tactics, while the rebellions in the Global South that kept the movement alive were nothing close to pacifist.

Many of the proponents of nonviolence were drawing on a rich if somewhat flawed history of peaceful movements for change, like the Latin American solidarity movement in the US or the anti-militarist and anti-nuclear movements in Europe. But many of these older, principled pacifists have disappeared, while those who have remained active were scarcely present in the emergence of the new nonviolent mass movements. In the face of its defeats, nonviolence nourished itself not in the experience of social movements, which repeatedly counseled against it, but rather anchored itself with the support of the mass media, the universities, wealthy benefactors, and governments themselves (see Chapter 8). Nonviolence has become increasingly external to social movements, and imposed upon them.

As this has happened, direct debate between the idea of nonviolence and that of a diversity of tactics has become increasingly rare. The criticisms of nonviolence that were published in those years made a number

⁵ <http://www.crimethinc.com/blog/2012/09/17/post-debate-debrief-video-and-libretto/>

⁶ The transcript of Harsha Walia's part of the debate, and a link to a video of the entire debate, can be found at <http://riselikelions.net/pamphlets/14/10-points-on-the-black-bloc>.

of arguments that would have to be either rebutted or acknowledged for any honest debate to continue. These include:

- the accusation that proponents of nonviolence, in conjunction with the State, have falsified the history of the movement against the war in Vietnam, the struggles for civil rights in the US, and the independence movement in India to portray movements that used a diversity of tactics as nonviolent, and to make a partial or limited victory seem like a full victory;
- the argument that the State was able to prevent the movement from attaining full victory, both in the case of civil rights and Indian independence, thanks to the role of pacifists in dialoguing with the government and attacking others in the movement who used more combative tactics;
- the fact that proponents of nonviolence, particularly those who are white and middle-class, have heavily edited the teachings of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Gandhi to cut out those figures' own learning processes and their radicalization in later years, and to silence their criticisms of white progressive allies or their support for non-pacifist movements including urban rioters and armed liberation movements;
- documentation of government, police, and media encouragement of nonviolence within social movements, including government strategy papers that show that the State prefers to go up against a peaceful movement rather than a combative movement;
- evidence of paternalism and racism by nonviolent organizations towards the struggles of poor people and people of color;
- the argument that government and business institutions are structurally immune to a "change of heart" and that historically a strictly nonviolent resistance has never provoked massive mutiny from the military, police, or other institutions, as has combative or diverse resistance;
- a long list of gains won by movements that used a diversity of tactics;
- the argument that "violence" is an intrinsically ambiguous category that enables more analytical manipulation than precision;
- the argument that most of the alleged problems with revolutionary violence are in fact problems that can be attributed to authoritarian movements that use violence and not to anti-authoritarian movements that use violence.³

³All of these arguments are explained at length and documented in *How Nonviolence Protects the State*.

Yet proponents of nonviolence in recent years have not acknowledged these criticisms, neither to rebut them nor to revise their own positions. They continue repeating the clichés, the misinformation, the broad statements, and the name-dropping of Gandhi and King that sparked the criticisms in the first place. But more often still, they avoid any direct communication altogether. In social movements across the world, they have begun spreading the claim that the Black Bloc in particular, or masked rioters in general, are police provocateurs and government agents. Never mind that in every single one of the many countries where this cheap accusation has been made, there are comrades in the social movements who argue in favor of self-defense against the police, of taking over the streets, and of smashing banks; never mind that they have already published explanations of their actions and that they would also be willing to sit down with those of another opinion to debate these things; and never mind that many of them have dedicated their lives to social movements for years—not just to the task of attacking banks but also to solidarity in all its forms, as well as many kinds of creation and self-organization.

With increasing frequency, unscrupulous supporters of nonviolence have spread the accusation, often without any evidence, that other members of a social movement are police provocateurs, and they have done this precisely because they are afraid to debate. They have to rob their opponents of any legitimacy and prevent bystanders to the debate from realizing that there is indeed any debate going on, that the social movements contain conflicting beliefs and practices. And by spreading false rumors of infiltration and dividing the movement, they expose those they accuse to violence, whether that is the violence of arrest or the violence of fellow protesters. On a number of occasions, police have tracked down and arrested those "bad protesters" who are accused of being infiltrators in order to clear their names. Supporters of nonviolence have often aided police in identifying the "bad protesters".⁴ And after organizing or participating in debates on nonviolence over a hundred times in Europe, and North and South America, I am convinced that those who have most often physically attacked fellow protesters have been supporters of nonviolence.

⁴ One website, violentanarchists.wordpress.com, contains dozens of examples from multiple countries across the world showing how accusations of being provocateurs are made against anarchists with no evidence or contradictory evidence, how the mainstream media often promote these rumors, and how these rumors have sometimes resulted in people getting arrested.